

Portsmouth School Committee - Legislative Priorities 2024

The Portsmouth School Committee respectfully asks our legislators to support the following issues during the 2024 Legislative Session:

1. Universal Free School Breakfast and Lunch

The National School Breakfast and Lunch Program serves nutritious school meals on a daily basis that meet all United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) standards. Despite the myriad ways that proper nutrition is linked to school success for students, there are many shortfalls in participation in these programs. Data and information collected at the national level shows that too many children who need free or reduced-price school meals are not certified to receive them; the eligibility requirement for free school meals is out of reach for many low-income families; and school districts are struggling to respond to school meals debt.

Offering free meals to all students would eliminate the barriers for children whose families' income is near the cutoff line to receive free school meals. Universal free school meals would eliminate the stigma some children fear of being different from their classmates. School districts would no longer have to collect unpaid meal fees from families or absorb the costs of uncollected debt. It is time that Rhode Island joins the growing number of states, including our neighbor Massachusetts as well as California, Maine, Colorado, Minnesota and New Mexico, in instituting free breakfast and lunch for all students.

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/nslp-fact-sheet>

2. State Funding Formula and Financial Concerns

a) Allocating State Funds for Education/Funding Formula Revisions

More equitable funding is necessary since some of the state's most affluent districts (e.g., East Greenwich and Barrington) received the greatest percentage increases in state aid per pupil over the past three years.

If any changes are made to the funding formula we request that the State at least institute a cap for FY25 (no more than 2% or another reasonable number) on the percentage increase or decrease that could affect districts. Unanticipated cuts or significant increases in state aid make the budgeting process difficult for districts and municipalities to manage and ultimately have an impact on educational programs for students.

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b) High-Cost Special Education

The cost of educating students with disabilities continues to increase even for the most well-managed school budget. For example, the 2023-24 cost of out-of-district tuition for Portsmouth is estimated to be over one million dollars. Portsmouth typically receives around \$100,000 from the high-cost special education categorical fund to help offset these costs. In Massachusetts, districts are responsible for a fixed amount. Then costs above that amount for high-cost special education are covered by the state.

We ask our State legislators to support an increase in the high-cost special education categorical fund included in the funding formula aid.

c) Statewide Transportation

The legislature enacted the “Statewide Transportation for students who Attend School Outside of Their Residence LEA” to provide fiscal efficiencies for student transportation outside of district. The system, while purportedly offering efficiencies has failed year over year to accomplish this, particularly as it relates to cost. It is not cost effective, and it is not efficient.

We request that the State address this issue by studying the effectiveness of statewide transportation to identify cost effective solutions for LEAs as it relates to transportation.

3. ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) Determination Process

When students are under the care of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and placed in a residential setting, that triggers what is known as an ESSA determination call to decide if the student should remain in their current district or transfer to the district of that residential setting. Districts have very little say in a final ESSA determination by DCYF.

When students reside in Portsmouth, we are responsible for paying for the out-of-district tuition they require. However, we have had situations where Portsmouth has had to continue to pay for the cost of an out-of-district placement EVEN AFTER the student no longer resides in Portsmouth. These decisions impact our already constrained school department budget.

We ask our state delegation to push for a review of the ESSA Determination Process with a particular focus on giving the districts more of a voice in how students are educated and clarifying the funding responsibilities based on residence.

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4. High-Speed Internet for Aquidneck Island

Over the past year, Rhode Island Commerce established the [ConnectRI program](#), working closely with the recently formed Rhode Island Statewide Broadband Advisory Council. As required by the federal rulemaking accompanying unprecedented federal dollars* for broadband infrastructure improvements, Rhode Island Commerce is working to develop a Five Year Action Plan, Initial Proposal, and a Digital Equity Plan for addressing broadband issues across the state. Access to high-quality, affordable broadband continues to be an important concern for the Portsmouth community, which is mostly "underserved" with regard to broadband, according to federal standards cited in a [January 2022 report from Connect Greater Newport](#). Many families in the Portsmouth school community cannot access reliable, high-quality broadband at a reasonable rate, something that has become increasingly important for distance learning and other aspects of education.

While we await the Five Year Action Plan, Initial Proposal, and Digital Equity Plan, given the importance of this issue to Aquidneck Island communities, we would urge our state delegation to continue to prioritize advocating for access to reliable, high quality and affordable broadband to help Portsmouth families. Secondly, we respectfully request our state delegation engage with Rhode Island Commerce to call for broadband competition, through new marketplace entrants accountable to their community partners by being forthcoming and transparent.

*\$108.7M of BEAD, \$25M in ARPA CPF = \$133.7M.

5. We request that our State legislators keep us informed about any legislation focused on the following initiatives and ways that could benefit the students of Portsmouth:

- a) Age-Appropriate Career Development for a Green and Blue Economy
- b) School Waste Recycling and Waste Removal
- c) Support the Green and Healthy Schools Initiative